



A Letter to Senator McMahon

J. Robert Oppenheimer

To cite this article: J. Robert Oppenheimer (1949) A Letter to Senator McMahon, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 5:6-7, 163-163, DOI: [10.1080/00963402.1949.11457071](https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.1949.11457071)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.1949.11457071>



Published online: 15 Sep 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

A LETTER TO SENATOR MCMAHON

J. Robert Oppenheimer

This letter from one of America's most distinguished scientists to the Chairman of the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy, was introduced at the Committee hearings on the AEC fellowship program on May 17.

DEAR SENATOR MCMAHON:

From the press, and directly from the Atomic Energy Commission, I have learned of the recent discussions about the Commission's fellowship program, which raise the question of whether candidates for fellowships supported by funds from the Commission should or should not be subject to investigation and clearance procedures. It seems to me that this question, and the implications of the decisions here taken with regard to the Federal support of science and education generally, are closely related to many of the great issues on which you have taken so constructive and farseeing a position. I am writing to you in the hope that in one way or another it may prove helpful to you to have an expression of my views. The question at issue clearly does not present some of the grave and often tragic aspects that the maintenance of security on secret technical work has brought so prominently to the forefront. For this reason, I have come to believe that we can and should deal with it unequivocally.

1. The present situation, as I understand it, is this: The Atomic Energy Commission has advanced funds to the National Research Council, and has asked the National Research Council to use these for the granting of fellowships. In making this request, the Commission has asked the Council to pursue its traditional methods of selecting fellows. In this selection, considerations of scientific and intellectual competence play a decisive part. Considerations of character are not excluded; but, in the past, no effort has been made by the National Research Council to determine the political views, sympathies, or associations of candidates. My understanding is that the Commission has accepted this procedure and has endorsed it. With the basic wisdom of this decision, I fully agree.

2. In considering the issue, we need first to ask ourselves what effects we can anticipate if, from time to time, young men and women who are Com-

munist, or who have Communistic sympathies or associations, are in fact granted fellowships. The fellowships are, of course, in fields where no access to restricted data will be needed or granted; and there can be no question of any jeopardy to security. What is more, there is no direct commitment, and no implication, that recipients of the fellowships will later be engaged in secret work. The Commission does not require this, nor do the research fellows. As a matter of fact, only a small fraction of the scientists of the country can or should be engaged in such secret work. The Scientific Panel of the Secretary of War's Interim Committee at one time estimated that even in the fields of the greatest relevance, not more than 15 per cent of our scientists would be associated with the

atomic energy programs; and of these, of course, many will be concerned with their nonclassified aspects. The actual practices of the Commission bear out these predictions. Thus one must ask the question of whether it is a proper charge upon the Federal Government, and upon the Atomic Energy Commission in particular, to support the training and research of men who will not be directly involved in the work of the Commission. It is the Commission's opinion, and this is an opinion fully shared by the General Advisory Committee, that the answer to this question is in the affirmative. For basic work in science, in aspects which are not and may not be under the direct control of any one Federal agency, is, nevertheless, a major source of our scientific progress, of invention, discovery, and technical leadership.

There are many examples of discoveries basic to the present work of the Atomic Energy Commission which were in fact made by Communists or Communist sympathizers. Of these many examples, we may cite a famous one: The major—one might almost say the only—present peaceful application of atomic energy rests on the preparation and use of artificial radioactive materials, which were discovered by Joliot, who is a Communist, and by his wife, who is a Communist sympathizer. It would be folly to suppose that the United States would be the stronger, or our science and industry the more vigorous, if this discovery had not been made. It would be contrary to all experience to suppose that only those who throughout their lives have held conformist political views would make the great discoveries in the future. The people and the Government of the United States have a stake in scientific discovery and invention; and it is for this stake, rather than as an act of benevolence toward the recipients of the grants-in-aid, that one must look for justification for having a fellowship program at all.

3. The argument given above would seem to me a cogent ground for maintaining the Commission's policy, even if the determination of loyalty and reliability could be made by the most straightforward and satisfactory methods. As you well know, the actual procedures which have been employed, and which perhaps must be employed, in order to establish the loyalty of an applicant, are far from simple and far from satisfactory. They involve secret, investigative programs which make difficult the evaluation and criticism of

(Continued on page 178)

In This Issue

The "Cleansing" of the AEC Fellowship Program	161
A Letter to Senator McMahon J. Robert Oppenheimer.....	163
Washington Notes: AEC Under Fire Anne W. Marks.....	164
The Fellowship Program: Testimony Before the Joint Committee	166
The AEC Fellowships: Shall We Yield or Fight? Leo Szilard	177
Reflections on Government Edward U. Condon.....	179
Hickenlooper v. Lilienthal.....	182
FAS Announces Policy Decisions.....	184
Psychology and Structure of Large-Scale Physical Research L. Kowarski	186
Science, Materialism, and the Human Spirit—a Symposium Percy W. Bridgman.....	192
Julius S. Bixler.....	194
Walter T. Stace.....	197
Jacques Maritain	199
Why Another Cyclotron? L. A. DuBridge.....	201
"Histopathology of Irradiation" Reviewed by Shields Warren.....	204
The present issue constitutes a double number—Volume V, Nos. 6 and 7.	

Perhaps there is a loophole in the Constitution. Or maybe in times of stress the Constitution gets stretched a bit. Scientists are not qualified to judge such legal issues, yet we scientists cannot help being concerned.

AS CITIZENS, we are bound to be concerned because we are asked to sanction something that comes very close to the persecution of a political minority. And as scientists we are bound to be concerned because the Government will henceforth send us men to work in our laboratories who have been selected in a manner contrary to the tradition that has prevailed for over a century at our great universities, as well as at the universities of Western Europe.

What are the overriding national interests that require us to pay such a price? And if there are none, why should we condone political discrimination of this sort?

It is well to remember that there was a wave of persecution of Communists after the first World War under Attorney-General A. Mitchell Palmer, at a time when Russia represented no military threat to the United States, and, in many ways the persecution then was worse than anything that has happened this time—so far. But this time, the scientists are being asked to sanction persecution by accepting students into their laboratories on the basis of a selection that is not free from political bias.

If there are no overriding national interests involved, why should we tolerate the breach of a tradition which has hitherto prevailed at our great universities, even though not all of our universities abided by it with equal tenacity?

It is a vital part of this tradition that scientific ability be made the sole criterion for the selection of those who are given facilities for research or faculty appointments. The requirement of a non-Communist affidavit is the first breach of this tradition that has resulted from accepting Federal aid to education, and there is every reason to expect that others will follow.

Federal aid to education may be a necessity, but Federal political control of education is an evil. This evil our universities will not be able to resist unless scientists take a stand based on the major principle which is involved, and on which they are united. Once we give up this stand and retreat, there is no second line of defense behind which we can unite.

If asking for a non-Communist affidavit is reasonable, then it is also reasonable for the Government to refuse to take an applicant's word for his not being a Communist, and to *investigate* all applicants. And, if it is reasonable to investigate holders of AEC fellowships, why is it not equally reasonable to investigate holders of fellowships from the National Science Foundation? And if a university receives Federal aid to its educational and research program, is it not quite reasonable to investigate the members of the faculty and the students who benefit from such aid?

Those who reconcile themselves to the first breach of our tradition will in due time reconcile themselves to a second breach. Those who follow the principle of the lesser evil will have to retreat again and again. If we do not take a stand on the first occasion, when our most valued tradition is threatened, we shall never take a stand.

The scientists, ever since they scored a major victory in defeating the May-Johnson Bill, and thus helped to bring about civilian control of atomic energy, have been very conscious of the importance of their good public relations. Many of them think that it is better from the viewpoint of public relations to appear "reasonable" at this time, and to make concessions, rather than to take a fighting stand.

They might be right about this, for this time, if we give battle, we cannot be sure that we shall win.

But there are more important things for us to think about these days than our good public relations. There are more important considerations than our natural desire to win every battle. There is justice to think about, and freedom, and our integrity.

Justice and freedom have never been secure for very long in any one area of the world. None of us can say for sure what fate awaits them in the United States in the crisis through which we shall be going in the remainder of this century. Freedom and justice might survive this crisis; or they might not. They might perish and the efforts of scientists might be of little avail. What we scientists *can* do is to resolve that they shall not be allowed to perish without a fight. And those of us who do not wish to fight can at least refuse to help dig the grave.

Oppenheimer's Letter

(Continued from page 163)

evidence; they take into consideration questions of opinion, sympathy, and association in a way which is profoundly repugnant to the American tradition of freedom; they determine at best whether at a given time an individual does have sympathy with the Communist program and association with Communists, and throw little light on the more relevant question of whether the man will in later life be a loyal American. It would be foolish to suppose that a man against whom no derogatory information can be found at the age of twenty was by virtue of this guaranteed loyal at the age of thirty. It would be foolish to suppose that a young man sympathetic to and associated with Communists in his student days would by that fact alone become disloyal, and a potential traitor. It is basic to science and to democracy alike that men can learn by error.

4. My colleagues and I attach a special importance to restricting to the utmost the domain in which special secret investigations must be conducted. For they inevitably bring with them a morbid preoccupation with conformity, and a widespread fear of ruin, that is a more pervasive threat precisely because it arises from secret sources. Thus, even if it were determined, and I do not believe that it should be, that on the whole the granting of fellowships, or, more generally, of Federal support, to Communist sympathizers, were unwise, one would have to balance against this argument the high cost in freedom that is entailed by the investigative mechanisms necessary to discover and to characterize such Communist sympathizers. This is what we all have in mind in asking that these intrinsically repugnant security measures be confined to situations where real issues of security do in fact exist and where, because of this, the measures, though repugnant, may at least be intelligible.

You and I have had occasion to discuss in the past how central a place the control of atomic energy occupies in the preservation of the basic freedoms of inquiry, freedoms essential at once for scientific progress and for the preservation of our democratic institutions. It is because I believe that the issue which has been raised here bears directly on the maintenance of freedom of inquiry that I hold it so important that it be wisely resolved.

With every warm good wish,
ROBERT OPPENHEIMER